

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

By Carleton Knight III

With the recent demolition of the old Sailors Home on Powder Point, Duxbury has joined the growing list of American communities destroying their past. What will be the next to go in the name of progress? The bridge? Mattakeesett Hall? The King Caesar House?

"Well, of course not the King Caesar House," everyone will say. But the King Caesar House is no different from any of the other landmarks that make Duxbury what it is -- one of the finest collections of historic structures anywhere.

Duxbury, however, is more than just that. It is not a static museum like Sturbridge Village or Williamsburg; it is a living, breathing, working community. Yet it has taken no steps to see that its unique character will continue in years to come.

There are many ways to guarantee preservation of Duxbury's historic resources so they can be enjoyed and appreciated by future generations. But before getting into details of how to protect the past, it is important first to understand what qualifies as "historic" and what is meant by "historic preservation."

A Question

Few persons would disagree over describing the King Caesar House as historic, but what about its now-gone neighbor, the old Sailors Home. It was old, but not that old. George Washington, or even Myles Standish, certainly never slept there. Yet, who can forget the summer fairs or the cannon on the lawn? The old Sailors Home was a piece of Duxbury, admittedly a small piece, but nonetheless, a piece. And when all the pieces are gone, there is no history left.

What preservationists are trying to do is encourage people to look at old buildings like newspapers, bottles and aluminum cans; as resources that can be reused. "Recycle an old building, don't tear it down," is the rallying cry of a group of preservationists in Washington, D.C. Buildings all over the country are being recycled, as an article in the May 1975 issue of *Fortune* pointed out:

Boston alone has a large number of such efforts. An 1853 piano factory in the South End was converted into apartments and studios for artists; the old City Hall was adapted into offices and a restaurant; a coal bin on the waterfront is about to become a fire station; and a police station in the Back Bay is now an art museum.

In New York City, a cast iron department store was converted into luxury apartments; in Princeton, N.J., a 41-room mansion is now 5 condominiums, with room for a caretaker; in Tacoma, Wash., the old City Hall, an imposing 10-story towered structure, was sold to a private developer who has made it into a commercial complex; and in Indianapolis, the Union Station will soon be booming with activity from shops, restaurants, offices and passenger trains.

Wide Range

Historic buildings, then, are not limited only to those in which famous people lived or only to those that are fine examples of a particular style of architecture. They are structures that have meaning to their community. Similarly, historic preservation is more than just making an old house into another museum. It can be taking an old building and

giving a new life or a continued life as a functioning, real-estate-tax-paying part of its community.

What can a town like Duxbury do to preserve its historic heritage? The first step includes 2 parts -- the appointment of a historic commission by the selectmen and the undertaking of a survey of the town's historic resources. The commission should include trained professionals, such as architects and planners, as well as other townspeople interested in historic preservation. The survey, which could be done by volunteer help from the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society, should locate and describe all historic structures and should be made a part of the town master plan.

In too many communities all across America, a structure is found to be historic just before the highway builders run a bulldozer through it. And then it is usually too late. An inventory can change that.

After completion of the survey, historic districts should be considered and individual landmarks should be designated. Historic districts can carry with them review boards to control, for the benefit of the entire community, changes to building exteriors as well as the design of new buildings to insure compatibility.

The houses on Washington St. from St. George St. to perhaps as far as Surplus St. could well be one historic district or several. As to individual landmarks, the King Caesar House, the Cable Office, the John Alden House, the Myles Standish homesite and even the bridge are but a few that come to mind.

The Advantages

What is the advantage of designating a landmark? Aside from being a manifestation of a community's pride in its past and offering a degree of protection to that past, such a designation at the national level can mean federal money to assist in the restoration of the landmark.

The National Park Service of the U.S. Department of the Interior maintains a comprehensive listing of America's landmarks in the National Register of Historic Places. It now includes more than 10,000 entries and is considered an honor not a burden to a community and a property owner. It means simply that the property has been recognized as worthy of preservation because of its architecture or historic interest.

There are 9 sites in Plymouth listed in the National Register; the Daniel Webster Law Office in Marshfield is listed. No Duxbury sites are listed.

National Register status brings with it 2 important things. First, any project funded or licensed by the U.S. government that affects National Register property is viewed by a Presidentially appointed body, the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. The council is empowered to suggest changes to preserve the historic nature of the property. Several years ago it was able to stop construction of a highway along the riverfront in the French Quarter of New Orleans. More recently, it got the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to redesign a ghastly apartment building for the elderly so that it would better fit into the historic environment of Savannah, Ga.

The other aspect of a National Register listing is money. Under provisions of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, structures listed in the National Register are eligible for matching grants for acquisition and restoration from the National Park

Service. The funds are provided to the states on the basis of requests and are distributed through the state historic preservation officer. In the case of the Bay State, it is the Massachusetts Historical Commission that divides the money among the communities that ask for it.

Last year the funds totaled nearly \$25 million nationwide. Massachusetts received \$860,000, one of 4 states to receive the maximum amount. The money is available to public as well as private property owners and in the past such groups as town governments and historical societies as well as private individuals have received the matching funds for preservation.

There are those who say that federal funds should not be used for such things, that it is a waste of money. Congress has appropriated the funds (and is currently considering an increase to \$100-\$150 million for next year), which come from the sale of leases for off-shore mineral rights. If a community does not want to use the funds, it does not have to -- and there are certainly many others who would like an extra share.

Nonsense

In a similar vein, there are those who will say that the federal government will take over your property if you accept the money. This is simply not true. The only restriction on use of the money is that the preservation plan be approved and the owner promise to maintain the property after the funds have been given.

It is important to add at this point that very few private individuals receive the matching funds. The great majority goes to historical societies and preservation groups to assist them with projects.

One possibility for a National Park Service grant-in-aid in Duxbury might be the bridge. If it was listed in the National Register, it would be eligible for matching funds for a preservation study or for actual work. If, for example, Duxbury was able to get \$10,000 in Bicentennial funds and matched that with the town share of \$10,000, the Massachusetts Historical Commission would match the entire amount, or \$20,000, giving a total of \$40,000. That may not seem like a great deal of money for a problem as complex as the bridge, but it is a start. Furthermore, the figures are only a suggestion.

Faneuil Hall received \$60,000 for restoration work; the Mechanics Association in Worcester has been granted \$22,000 for a preservation feasibility study on Mechanics Hall; restoration of the third-floor ballroom of the privately owned Major Joseph Griswold House in Buckland will be aided with a \$500 grant; the Old Ship Meeting House in Hingham received \$1,750 for structural repairs.

The money is there; it is up to each community to ask for it.

While Duxbury has much to do and not much time to get its historic preservation effort in shipshape condition, there are many organizations willing to help. In Boston there are the Massachusetts Historical Commission and the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. In Washington there is the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the only national, private organization chartered by Congress to assist in the preservation of America's historic resources. It acts as a clearinghouse for preservation information, offers small grants and advice, maintains 12 museums, and publishes a monthly newsletter. It has 75,000 members and for more information, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1745 Jackson Place, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006.

As the Bicentennial approaches, Duxbury could give itself no better a gift than to assure that its historic character, which has

drawn people here for years, will be present for future generations to cherish and use.

It's too late to save the old Sailors Home, but it is not too late to save the rest. Duxbury has taken steps to protect it from overdevelopment. It must also take steps to make certain that it has a bright future for the past.

For more information, family are encouraged to contact the presidents of the Duxbury Historical Society, or the executive editor of the Duxbury News, or the Director of Historic Preservation, or the responsible person in charge of the organization, or the newspaper, Preservation News.